



1968

# Governing the Suburbs by Charles E. Gilbert

A. Dan Tarlock  
*Indiana University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/klj>

**Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.**

## Recommended Citation

Tarlock, A. Dan (1968) "Governing the Suburbs by Charles E. Gilbert," *Kentucky Law Journal*: Vol. 56 : Iss. 4 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/klj/vol56/iss4/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Kentucky Law Journal by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact [UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu](mailto:UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu).

*Manual*, when in its second edition, may be able to thin down, or at least present more rationally, problems of federal practice.

John E. Kennedy  
Associate Professor of Law  
University of Kentucky

GOVERNING THE SUBURBS. By Charles E. Gilbert. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1967. Pp. 364. \$10.00.

The heavy concentration of today's urban population in outdated jurisdictional units often results in an inefficient allocation of authority and responsibility. Often a governmental unit is too small to effectively confront the problems it faces or too large to mobilize sufficient human and financial resources to eliminate them. Some suggest that since the basic problem stems from the incapacity of the individual to relate to the sprawling, amorphous environment in which he lives, existing conurbations must be physically broken up and relocated across the country. The urban existentialist asserts, "The city is to be ruralized and the country is to be industrialized but the industrialization of the country is aimed at preserving the balance between town and country and escaping forever the giant conurbations of our time."<sup>1</sup> More realistic urbanists reject this bucolic ideal and accept existing land use patterns but urge that political institutions be radically restructured to efficiently apply existing human and economic resources to the solution of our seemingly endless urban problems.

Any book which purports to make a contribution to the growing flood of urban literature must provide data and insights to help create optimum levels of power consistent with democratic values. Professor Gilbert's book, *Governing the Suburbs*, began "in conversations with PENJERDEL (the Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware Project, Inc.) in 1962 about a study of suburban governments which would complement work then in progress with the Fels Institute of Local and State Government and the Pennsylvania Economy League."<sup>2</sup> The conversations were successful and resulted in a 376 page study of government structure, government performance, and political competition in three suburban counties near Philadelphia. As the author notes in his in-

---

<sup>1</sup> Winthrop, *Modern Proposals for the Physical Decentralization of Community*, 43 LAND ECONOMICS 17 (1967).

<sup>2</sup> C. GILBERT, GOVERNING THE SUBURBS xiii (1967) [Hereinafter cited as GILBERT].

roduction, the book will be of greatest interest to those who specialize in the governments of Bucks, Montgomery, and Delaware counties and of limited interest to general students of state and local government. The book documents a series of proposed and enacted local programs and the response of the electorate and power structure to them. It then attempts to place this data within the context of the theoretical relationship between electoral competition and governmental adequacy.

The author is quite modest in his method and aims; he does not purport to have presented a systematic study of the three counties. As he states "My approach to this study has been more qualitative than quantitative. In particular, I have not relied primarily on objective indices of governmental policy and performance, though I have tried to take account of fiscal and personnel data. I have used some survey data to try to get a line on wants felt by elements of the population, but I have also relied on statements by politicians and active participants about their popular attitudes and demands."<sup>3</sup>

The result is a book which I am sure describes accurately the political environment of Bucks, Delaware and Montgomery counties but does little else than verify existing assumptions about the performance of local politicians and the extent and effectiveness of citizen participation in city and county politics for it does not pose the right questions.<sup>4</sup> It is hardly news to read: "Political organization has been most centralized where electoral competition and socioeconomic pluralism are both weak. . . ." or "that the opportunity for participation may be more important in the sense of obligation, competence, and effectiveness than is overt participation itself."

The relevance of a book in this field must be judged by two criteria: 1) does it offer valid and new insights about the urban decision making process? or 2) does it provide a model for other similar studies? In this reviewer's opinion, *Governing the Suburbs* meets neither of these criteria. The author's approach degenerates into a series of superficial case studies and a competent restatement of accepted theories. Although a great deal of data about the three counties has been assembled and their major activities surveyed and

---

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 330.

<sup>4</sup> The author states in his introduction:

The questions asked about local governmental adequacy are not so systematic; there is, for example, no rigorous analysis of unit costs or efficiency. Issues considered include the ability to tax, plan, act effectively, and relate problems creatively and constructively. These adverbs suggest the practical, judgmental nature of the inquiry." *Id.* at 6-7. It is difficult to see how the second set of questions can be answered after a refusal to answer the first.

analyzed, the studies of specific programs are extremely generalized. It is difficult to pin down the factors which led to a given indecision or the impact which a decision had on the area; and very little effort has been made to determine the projected impact of alternative and rejected programs. The author was unwilling to formulate criteria to test the impact of the various programs and decisions on the area he studied. He occasionally stumbles upon an important insight but then fails to pursue it. He notes, in passing, for example, that "when asked about community expenditure in specific fields, leaders often perceived more real alternatives in zoning and development than they did in taxes and expenditures,"<sup>5</sup> but suggests only that this is due to the limited perspectives of local finance. An observation such as this is worthy of extended analysis for it may lead to greater insight about the location of leverage points in the urban decision making process.

The author occasionally refers to the problems of scale and the need to restructure existing institutions to achieve an optimum centralization of power, but because the scope of his investigations was too broad, his conclusions are so vague as to be meaningless. A few examples of his conclusions include:

Land planning is frequently said to require a regional framework. Regional planning might consist of research or regulation or both. While regional land-use regulation might provide a framework of "circulation" systems, residential zones, basic public facilities, and general density controls, comprehensive planning in more detail (including zoning, subdivision control, and public services) would probably be cumbersome and insensitive to local situations. As argued above, many of the regional basics already exist in greater Philadelphia, but regional data collection, projection, and posing of issues could be useful functions. County planning is potentially important for both newly developing areas and old, renewable districts for reasons suggested in Part V (see pp. 285-87). Comprehensive planning (in the city tradition) is a county possibility, including zoning, subdivision control, and integration with public services. County capital programming while less important for comparison and rationality than in large cities, would assist publicity and accountability. Actually, county planners have lost statutory power in the last decade, but the functions here suggested would, legally speaking, be easy to confer."<sup>6</sup>

More meaningful generalizations could have been drawn if the author had chosen to investigate the impact of one or two significant zoning decisions. Such a decision is *National Land Investment Co. v. Kohn*<sup>7</sup> which occurred near the area studied. The Pennsylvania Supreme Court held unconstitutional an ordinance which required a minimum area of four acres per building in a portion of county. A

---

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 284.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 311.

<sup>7</sup> 419 Pa. 504, 215 A.2d 597 (1966).

minimum lot zoning controversy provides a manageable microcosm for the study of local politics because such an ordinance accentuates the conflict between man's desire to protect his neighborhood from encroachment by lower income groups and his responsibility as a metropolitan citizen. The Court noted "The township's brief raises (but unfortunately, does not attempt to answer) the interesting issue of the township's responsibility to those who do not yet live in the township but may become part of the expansion of the suburbs."<sup>8</sup> The court provided a partial answer by suggesting that the equal protection clause prohibits a growing suburb from using minimum lot zoning to deflect a disproportionate number of potential residents to surrounding communities to avoid paying increased taxes for the new services which increased growth would require.

Such an equal protection argument is premised on a number of factual assumptions which have not yet been verified. Does large lot zoning really deflect potential new residents to surrounding communities? If so, how many? Do these communities experience sharply accelerated growth rates? If so, do they have the financial resources to provide the services which will be demanded? Does the attempt of one community to maintain a life style by excluding new residents mean that there will be a decrease in the quality of life in surrounding communities because they do not have the financial resources to provide a high level of public services? Answers to questions such as these will help to delineate the effect of such an ordinance. Once this is known, it is possible to speculate about levels of optimum centralization of power. Perhaps decisions such as this should be made by regional, state, or inter-state bodies.<sup>9</sup> Similar examples of problems which merit extended analysis can be cited for the other areas of local government which the author has examined.

The author could well have published only his last two chapters, Political Democracy and Governmental Adequacy for they are the only part of the book which offers new insight into the urban decision making process. The bulk of the book may provide interested persons with needed factual information about specific programs or some handy statistics to show what programs voters favor the most. Otherwise the book has very little to offer.

A. Dan Tarlock  
Assistant Professor of Law  
Indiana University

---

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 612.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of proposed reforms to achieve greater centralization and thus standardization of zoning decisions, see R. BABCOCK, *THE ZONING GAME* 152-85 (1966).